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# When the Going Gets Tough, Play Ball

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

In baseball, in order to score you need to make it to first base, go on to second, touch third, and continue on to home plate. This same concept can help you cope when you are troubled by a problem. You don't need bats or balls or even a sunny day. But the metaphor can help you to remember a process that can bring comfort to you during a tough time, or when someone you care about is distressed.

Uncomfortable feelings are a sign that we need to *go to bat* on a problem in our lives. If we have a companion on the journey, a partner with whom anxiety, fatigue, and frustration can be shared, we are richly blessed. When we have family members who can lend us energy and help us find our way in distressing times, that is a blessing as well. When we can be the empathetic mate or supportive loved one, we are living out God's plan for us (James 1:19).

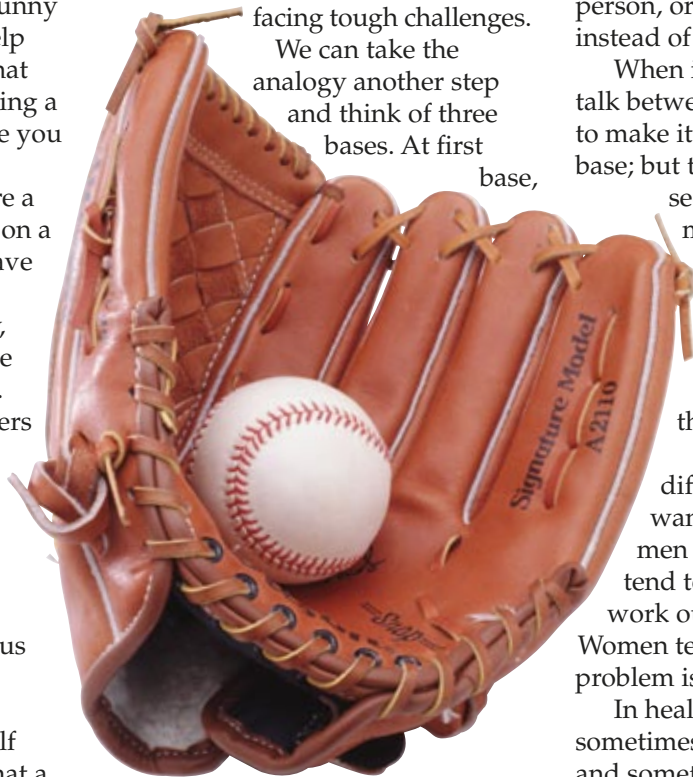
If you are reaching out to someone, you can see yourself as a coach.<sup>1</sup> Let's consider what a baseball coach does:

- ▶ The coach does not solve problems. The coach is there to help the players work their way around the bases, not do the batting or running for them.
- ▶ A good coach listens and looks very intently at what is going on. A good coach lets the players know they are not alone in

grappling with the challenge and offers a second set of eyes and ears for understanding.

- ▶ A good coach helps player morale by providing an invaluable boost when another is facing tough challenges.

We can take the analogy another step and think of three bases. At first base,



we can help a person identify the conflict or problem that is generating a negative emotion. On second base, we can gather data to understand the facts of the situation and the other's concerns. Third base is where solutions are sought.

Many get hung up on first base because the *coach* offers unhelpful

responses such as encouraging recovery instead of expressing concern, giving advice instead of simply being there and listening, minimizing the loss instead of validating the feelings of the other person, or forcing cheerfulness instead of offering empathy.

When it comes to supportive talk between genders, women tend to make it easily to first or second base; but they tend to stay on second base instead of moving on to third base and working on possible solutions. By contrast, men tend to barely touch first, skip second, and dash to third base where they quickly give advice.

Men and women also differ in when and if they want another's help. When men are distressed, they tend to want to be alone or work out problems themselves. Women tend to want to talk when a problem is troubling them.

In healthy relationships, sometimes we do the coaching and sometimes we are running the bases. May God bless you as you *play ball*.

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1. Analogy adapted from Dr. Susan Heitler's workshop, *The Power of Two*.

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Susan Murray is an assistant professor of behavioral sciences at Andrews University.